

Aristotle Good, Churchill better, Blair best? The art and history of speech-making (guest-blog)

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This report on our latest Media Agenda Talk by Polis intern Matilde Beccatti.

A great argument, great writing and a great occasion: these are the three conditions to become an “at least average” speaker according to Philip Collins.

The Times political columnist and former speechwriter for Tony Blair, talked to LSE students about one of the most important arts that has ever been taught: the art of the discourse, the rhetoric. From Aristotle to the football player George Best*, he explained how to make speeches “that won’t be forgotten”.

He stressed the importance of preparation: thinking, editing, talking out loud but most importantly reading are all more essential steps than the actual act of delivering the speech. “Too many speakers are in a hurry to write”, but preparing an argument and being able to summarize it in just few key words is essential for a good performance, especially today where speeches are reported by the media using only sound bites.

A lot of things have changed since Lincoln or Churchill made memorable speeches and today the most important of the three conditions Collins talked about, is becoming harder to find. This condition is the great occasion, the circumstance that makes a normal speech into a moment in history.

Our politicians talk much more often than their predecessors in front of bigger and more variegated audiences and have to adapt their linguistic register. They have to weigh every word, being always under media scrutiny.

Especially in rich ‘post-ideology’ democracies the big arguments that filled the speeches of the past don’t occur anymore and our politicians use “huge rhetoric for small facts”.

But is it true that great occasions don’t happen anymore or are we simply avoiding them?

*This was a banner held up by a crowd of football fans that illustrated the virtue of brevity for wit:

“Maradona Good, Pele Better, George Best”

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